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### Review of 'Cook's Camden' by Mark Swenarton

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Mark Swenarton, *Cook's Camden: the making of modern housing*, London: Lund Humphries, 2017, 328pp., £45 (hbk.)

In September 1967, the architect Neave Brown wrote in *Architectural Design* that 'the problem of the form of mass housing has yet to be solved'. Nonetheless, one contribution to the debate existed in the form of a small terrace of houses on Winscombe Street in Camden, north London, which had been recently completed to Brown's designs. This terrace, which included Brown's own house, countered the Corbusian ideal of buildings in parkland by restating the traditional value of the street, i.e., as a space tightly bounded by buildings. The houses themselves had a compact, relatively open plan on three levels, which were conceived as distinct zones for occupation by children and adults in the manner proposed by Christopher Alexander and Serge Chermayeff's influential *Community and Privacy*. Externally, each house had a small garden which opened onto a larger, communal space.

The Winscombe Street houses were built within the same cost limits as the council housing of the era. As a result, the project stood Brown in good stead when, in 1965, he applied for an architect's post in the newly formed London Borough of Camden. There, under the enlightened leadership of the Borough Architect, Sydney Cook, Brown and his young colleagues – notably Peter Tábori, Gordon Benson, and Alan Forsyth – designed a celebrated sequence of housing schemes which similarly challenged the 'buildings in parkland' approach as well as the 'mixed development' characteristic of much post-war British council housing, in which towers were combined with lower-rise buildings, set in open space. The Camden architects interrogated architectural and planning history for strategies deemed still to be of value, and then sought to re-cast them in a contemporary light. They produced homes which demonstrated continuity with the surrounding urban fabric whilst also being strikingly modern in their appearance and construction.

Mark Swenarton's ground-breaking study, *Cook's Camden*, examines a selection of these projects, designed in the late 1960s and realised during the 1970s. Swenarton's book has been published amid a wave of books dedicated to so-called 'Brutalism', i.e., a boldly massed concrete architecture. However, unlike the authors of many of these books, which often take an form-led, stylistic approach, Swenarton has produced a detailed historical account which is rooted in a close examination of archival sources and interviews with the key protagonists. Indeed, the 'Brutalist' tag barely figures in a study which instead examines the conception of these projects in context.

Swenarton begins in the early 1960s, charting an international reaction against 'high towers in empty space' (p. 17), and the emergence of high-density, low-rise planning

in such examples as Atelier 5's Siedlung Halen. He then turns to the borough of Camden, formed in 1965 from the former metropolitan authorities of St Pancras, Hampstead, and Holborn. Sydney Cook had been the borough architect in Holborn and now took on the same role in Camden, where he assembled a team of bright young graduates and allowed them considerable freedom. Neave Brown was one of these new recruits. In major schemes at Fleet Road and then Alexandra Road, Brown developed the principles of Winscombe Street: streets defined by buildings; houses entered from the street; and flowing open plans. Peter Tábori, who had studied with Richard Rogers, explored the same ideas at Highgate New Town, producing a design which combined the sensibility of the classic Italian hill towns with an interest in 'clusters' as the basis of community. At Branch Hill and Maiden Lane, meanwhile, Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth added lessons drawn from the work of Gillespie Kidd and Coia, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, notably an interest in oppositions between spaces of different character. Swenarton also shows how private practices undertook a significant amount of Camden's housing work. During the 1970s, for example, sensitive infill schemes were produced by Edward Cullinan, and by Colquhoun and Miller, showing a nuanced approach to stylistic and typological context.

Two particular concerns inform the account. The first is an interest in the 'stuff' of architecture. Swenarton carefully describes the development of each design, and the buildings as realised. What emerges is the architects' dedication to detail, and to providing the best for the future residents of these homes. The precisely written text is effectively complemented by beautifully redrawn plans and sections. Archive images are accompanied by new photographs (by Tim Crocker), many of which include people and so emphasise the idea that these estates are not simply sculptural exercises in 'Brutalist' style but rather inhabited places.

At the same time, Swenarton's account is especially strong on the contexts in which these projects were conceived, funded, and realised. Cook's time at Camden – 1965–1973 – coincided at a national level with an economic slowdown and the fracturing of the political consensus which had hitherto underpinned the welfare state. None of the Camden housing projects had an especially easy birth. Alexandra Road, for example, cost nearly £20 million instead of the £5 million originally projected, and took 6.5 years instead of 3.5 years. Throughout the book, and especially in a chapter on the Alexandra Road public inquiry, Swenarton unpicks the issues. He explains the policies (and policy changes) which shaped the design and delivery of housing in this period, and the impact of broader economic trends. Finally, he explains the impact of local and national political shifts (and arguments), and in particular the ways in which Camden's housing formed a battleground not only between the political right and left, but also between different factions of the Labour Party.

*Cook's Camden*, therefore, is essential reading not only for historians of post-war British architecture and planning but also social and political historians. Although one might have wished for more on the way that the Camden office was organised, or the contributions of other designers and technicians beyond the lead architects, the book is undoubtedly a landmark work. It sheds significant new light on a series of projects long recognised for their architectural quality. It also contributes to an emerging archive-based architectural history of the post-war decades which looks beyond the vagaries of style and form. In so doing, it shows how the welfare state project was challenged and re-shaped in a sometimes turbulent period of British history.

References:

Neave Brown, 'The form of housing', *Architectural Design* 37/9 (September 1967), pp. 432–33.

Alistair Fair  
University of Edinburgh

[Alistair.Fair@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Alistair.Fair@ed.ac.uk)